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Digitizing marginal objects – amateur films from the GDR in color

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Abstract: [Blog-Beitrag im Vorfeld des an der Konferenz gehaltenen Vortrages mit Diskussionsrunde]. The Film Colors projects of the University of Zurich and the Filmmuseum Potsdam joined forces, in order to digitize selected color films from the Filmmuseum's holdings. This blog post focuses on the results of a cooperation between the SNSF project Film Colors : Technologies, Cultures, Institutions located at the University of Zurich (Switzerland) and the Filmmuseum Potsdam (Germany), established by Josephine Diecke and Dennis Basaldella. The aim is to present an innovative collaboration that brings together specialized knowledge in the realms of film production and film technology with a particular focus on typically marginalized topics, such as amateur filmmaking and film stock manufacturing in selected historical contexts. How can both approaches enrich the debates about the preservation, digitization and circulation of marginal objects?

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Digitizing Marginal Objects: Amateur Films from the GDR in Color

The *Film Colors* projects of the University of Zurich and the Filmmuseum Potsdam joined forces, in order to digitize selected color films from the [Filmmuseum’s holdings](#). This blog post focuses on the results of a cooperation between the [SNSF project *Film Colors. Technologies, Cultures, Institutions*](#) located at the University of Zurich (Switzerland) and the [Filmmuseum Potsdam \(Germany\)](#), established by [Josephine Diecke](#) and [Dennis Basaldella](#). The aim is to present an innovative collaboration that brings together specialized knowledge in the realms of film production and film technology with a particular focus on typically marginalized topics, such as amateur filmmaking and film stock manufacturing in selected historical contexts. How can both approaches enrich the debates about the preservation, digitization and circulation of marginal objects?

The film material—with its two-fold significance as a “corpus mysticum” and a “corpus mechanicum” at the same time (Catanese 2013: 19) —is the red thread of the presented cooperation. Both dissertation projects are relying on film and non-film sources from the archival holdings of the Filmmuseum and were selected according to our common research interest in alternative approaches to the film and media histories of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Research on Independent Film Production in the GDR

Dennis Basaldella’s PhD project focuses on the neglected, marginal film production modes in the former GDR. This includes such production modes as the *private freie Filmhersteller*, freelance film professionals working during one or more projects for one or several employers, producing contract works within their own production company and production infrastructure, and the amateur studios. But why are these topics marginal? On the one hand, because research on GDR film history has mainly focused on the so-called ‘big players’ such as Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA), responsible for the film production and the Deutscher Fernsehfunk (DFF), the national television broadcaster, suggesting that those two protagonists were solely in charge of film and television production in the country. On the other hand, the topics of the films produced by freelancers and amateurs made them often uninteresting for current scientific research.

Still, reality shows another picture.

One example is freelance film professional is Horst Klein (1920-1993). His case demonstrates that other production groups also had a considerable contribution to the film corpus of the GDR. The legacy of Klein, stored since 1994 at the Filmmuseum Potsdam, shows that he produced approximately 900 nonfiction reportages and documentaries (mostly contract works) between 1946 and 1990. About 729 of them were produced for television. This is not only a considerable amount of films, but it also shows that the

production of the 'big players' was highly reliable on the works of marginal production groups such as the freelancers. The size of Kleins' legacy provides a unique source to explore the production mode of these freelancers since it contains not only 71 complete films but also other sources, such as production documents and Klein's work diaries.

The second neglected group is the amateurs. Even though they were controlled by the state, amateur films have been a central part of cultural life in the GDR from the beginning. As the studios were part of the factories and the companies in the socialist state, the films documented working life, other related topics such as safety at work or political subjects, but also the amateurs themselves during the shooting. By doing so, the films became unique documents of everyday life. For example, the films of the studio of the Wohnungsbaukombinat Berlin – the biggest housing society in the country – document the construction works of various socialist buildings in East Berlin such as the Fernsehturm at the Alexanderplatz or the big housing complexes in Marzahn. However, the proximity to their institutions and factories made it possible that amateurs could not only work with semi-professional 16mm film stocks, but also with professional film equipment.

Research on Development and Diffusion of Chromogenic Color Films

The SNSF project *Film Colors. Technologies, Cultures, Institutions* seeks to position historical color film technologies in their cultural and sociopolitical contexts. Color film processes based on chromogenic development dominated the second half of the 20th century, while their further development and dissemination was characterized by international and transnational exchanges. In the framework of her PhD project, Josephine investigates successful as well as less popular players who have shaped the production of chromogenic color film stocks and the materials' subsequent professional and amateur uses during the so-called 'Cold War'.

Agfa and its East German successor ORWO were one of the biggest raw film manufacturers, whose extensive role for the global distribution of color films is mostly minimized in historiographical overviews. Its headquarter in Wolfen was built in 1909 and continued film stock production almost immediately after World War II for the Socialist nations. From 1945 until 1964, the newly constructed film production plant in Leverkusen (West Germany) and the old one in Wolfen (East Germany) coexisted under the same name "Agfa". In 1964, Wolfen sold all the rights for the Agfa brand to Leverkusen and changed the company's name to ORWO, which is an acronym for 'ORiginal WOlfen'. Throughout their existence, their products constantly fell behind the international standards, set by the US-American Eastman Kodak. The biggest challenge for the film manufacturer was to keep up with the customers' demands and needs for a stable supply of qualitatively reasonable film materials.

Besides the successful implementation of the first negative-positive process for color films, Agfa also provided the first reversal film stock seriously competing with Kodachrome. The small gauge Agfacolor and its successors Orwocolor reversal and Orwo-

chrom negative and positive film stocks, covered a great share of the consumer market that amateur as well as freelancing filmmakers were dependent on. The “State-socialist Mode of Production” (Szczepanik 2013) especially differed from other Western ones and was shaped by material shortages and centralized supplies. To keep in mind these aspects of film production and its interdependency with the accessible media technologies puts artistic and economic choices into equally respected perspectives.

With the help of a diversified corpus of film and non-film sources, Josephine Diecke seeks to decipher the ways in which the chromogenic color film processes such as those of Agfa and ORWO have evolved and spread over time. Her research is therefore based on a multifaceted approach, including theoretical concepts and models from the field of Media Archaeology, Cultural Studies and especially the vocabulary and methodology of the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT). With regard to the interactive relationship between technological artefacts and social actors, Wiebe Bijker and Trevor Pinch (1987) introduced their own theoretical and practical mindset. By applying their principles to the study of color film developments, different social actors and groups such as freelancing filmmakers and amateurs are equally represented as professional filmmakers, and with this, also their respective needs and problems. How well regarded or disregarded have they been during the innovation and distribution process, especially in comparison with other social actors? How did they adapt to technological shortcomings and restrictions?

The *Timeline of Historical Film Colors* is a platform where all sorts of film gauges are exhibited alongside each other. Highly successful inventions as well as forgotten failures are part of the history of modern (mass) societies, and with this also the age of proliferated (color) images. The goal is to foster a profound research into the traditionally marginalized areas of private and vernacular uses of the same technological principles that more popular products stem from. Since technology never evolved in a societal vacuum, the current research must be informed by discursive practices and processes of identity formation through technology, too.

Cooperation: Digitizing Amateur and Independent Films in Color

In digitizing six more or less unknown films from the collection of the Filmmuseum, the two PhD projects joined forces to support a change of perspective towards the writing of (non-)canonical film history. The color films that have been digitized in this cooperation are mostly documents of daily life in the GDR. The earliest reel is a sort of ‘behind the scenes’ compilation of the DEFA movie [Maibowle](#), shot in 1959 by the director Günter Reisch himself. The edge markings of the 8mm print indicate the original negative material as Agfacolor. All the other films were shot after 1964 and therefore show a variation of ORWO signatures. The unknown animated accident prevention movie [\[Unfallschutz-Zeichentrickfilm\]](#) from the ČSSR, showing the accidents that can occur due to unsafe work in the factory, is preserved as a 16mm Orwocolor positive in the Filmmuseum’s holdings. The footage [\[Pfungsten 1981\]](#), showing an event organized by the GDR youth

movement Free German Youth (FDJ) in Cottbus, as well as the uncut footage [\[Berlin Nikolaiviertel\]](#) of the restoration process of the historic city center of Berlin, the Nikolaiviertel, were both recorded on Orwochrom UT 15 film stock, optimized for outdoor shootings, and in the case of *[Pfingsten 1981]* also on UK 17 film stock for the indoor scenes. The last two films in contrast were both shot on 16mm Orwochrom UK 3, a low contrast film stock for color television. Whereas [\[Neue Turmspitze auf Oberkirche Cottbus\]](#) (GDR 1988) features rare footage of the restoration of the new spire of the Oberkirche in Cottbus, *Maschinisten der Kohleveredlung* (GDR 1988, Horst Klein) was a contract work for the Schwarze Pumpe power station near Hoyerswerda (Saxony), shot as a professional film and focusing on the professions of the power plant. All films have been scanned at the University of Zurich in 5k.

Since color film stock was not common among non-professional filmmakers due to the high costs, the preserved color films are unique documents of their time. The substandard 16mm and 8mm film formats and the corresponding color film stocks from the East German Filmfabrik Wolfen also represent marginal objects because, even if they were mass produced and widespread, their meaning for film production is still often ignored. The same is true for their adaptation in the marginally observed production contexts of commercials, home movies and television. Therefore, the digitized films serve as a good starting point for further investigations into these numerous directions.

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Short Biographies

Josephine Diecke, M.A.

Bachelor of Arts in Film Studies and French Philology at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz (2013). International Master of Arts in Audiovisual and Cinema Studies at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main (2016) with a master thesis on the theoretical, practical and ethical aspects of film restoration. Part-time projectionist at a local arthouse cinema and student assistant for restoration and digitization projects at OMNIMAGO GmbH.

Her current research in the SNSF Project FilmColors. Technologies, Cultures, Institutions at the University of Zurich focuses on the contextualization of historical film color processes in selected cultural and socio-political frameworks from the 1940s onwards. The research work is integrated regularly into Prof. Barbara Flückiger's Timeline of Historical Film Colors. She is also a member of the editorial staff of the CINEMA Jahrbuch.

Dennis Basaldella, M.A.

Studies of Film Directing at the Nuova Università del Cinema e Televisione in Rome, Italy (2001 – 2003). Research Assistant to the Chair of Media Science in Potsdam, Germany (2011 – 2013). European Media Studies (Bachelor & Master) at the University of Potsdam (M.A.-thesis on the concept of history in the internet archive "*Wir waren so frei ... Momentaufnahmen 1989/1990*" based on Godard's history notion) (2006 – 2013). Member of the research project "*Regionale Bilder auf Filmen (1950 – 1990)*" on GDR amateur film at the Filmmuseum Potsdam (since 2014). Since 2016 also part-time employee.

His current PhD project at the department of Media Studies at the University of Hamburg, Germany, focuses on the work of GDR freelancer Horst Klein (1920 - 1993) and his impact on film and television production in the GDR.